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APOLLINARIANISM IN WORSHIP

REVISITED:

TORRANCE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE RENEWAL OF REFORMED WORSHIP

Roger J. Newell

Liturgy and theology go hand in hand. Theology divorced from worship is not divine, but liturgy that is divorced from theology is not true service of God. . . . As I see it, that is our [the Reformed church's] greatest contribution to the theology of the world Church—the carrying through into the ecumenical situation of an integration born out of the centrality of the doctrine of Christ, and therefore the Christological criticism of the doctrines of the Church, Ministry, and Sacraments, in order that as we seek to come together in Christ the doctrine of Christ may be allowed to reshape all our churches so that we may grow up together into the fullness of Christ.¹

Throughout his writings as a theologian of the Reformed church, T. F. Torrance insistently sought to recover a Christ-centered, Trinitarian worship for the church—evangelical, orthodox, and catholic. I would like to describe how he struggled to accomplish this goal by starting with his diagnosis of the recurring problem of Apollinarianism in our worship.

THE CHALLENGE OF APOLLINARIANISM THEN AND NOW

In Torrance's most prescient essay regarding the challenge facing contemporary Christian worship, "The Mind of Christ in Worship: The Problem of Apollinarianism in the Church," he carefully traced the Patristic roots of a kind of worship which had the unfortunate result of exalting the deity of Christ at the expense of diminishing his utterly real humanity.² Using J. A. Jungmann's study of ancient liturgy, Torrance describes how an effort to eradicate any hint of Arianism, with its subordination of Jesus, led to a liturgical practice of prayer directed *to* Christ, instead of *to the Father through Christ* as the one mediator. Why does this matter? Because prayer *to Christ* inevitably focuses on Christ in his majesty and grandeur

1 T. F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, vol. 1, *Order and Disorder* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959), 94.

2 T. F. Torrance, "The Mind of Christ in Worship: The Problem of Apollinarianism in the Liturgy," in *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 139–214.

within the Godhead “in a way that seriously diminished and sometimes eliminated the Biblical stress on the high priesthood of Christ and his human mediation of prayer to the Father.”³

The source of this error was Apollinarius and his claim that the human mind (*nous*) was set aside when the divine *Logos* became incarnate. Apollinarius argued that if Christ had a human mind, he would have had sinful thoughts, would not have been truly perfect, and hence would not have been able to redeem us. Here is the *monothelitism* that leads to *monophysitism*.⁴ In their diagnostic reply, the Cappadocians, including Gregory of Nazianzus, identified this as a virulent new strain of docetism because if Christ’s human nature is only represented by a body, but not a human mind, it means he was never ignorant and never had the power to choose sin. Removing from Jesus what corresponds to us and replacing it with what is sinless ultimately means that Jesus had no fully human experience and did not and does not share our human experience to the full. Christ, therefore, was not a priest joined to us by *fellow feelings*. All of this cuts the ground from his mediatorial activity on our behalf because the whole of human nature was not taken up in the incarnation. God has not really come all the way to us.⁵

In their response to Apollinarius, the Cappadocians strengthened Athanasius’ argument that in assuming our flesh, Jesus was at the same time healing it. As they put it, what Christ has not assumed he has not healed.⁶ An Apollinarian Jesus, whose human nature is absorbed by the divine nature, has lost the human nature. After many debates on surrounding issues, over 500 bishops gathered at Chalcedon in AD 451 to clarify the church’s commitment to Nicea in 325. Chalcedon declared that Jesus Christ is complete in Godhead *and* complete in humanity—truly God and truly human, acknowledged in two natures, without confusion. The distinction of natures is in no way abolished because of the union, but rather the characteristic property of each nature is preserved and comes together to form one person. Let us remember that in teaching that Jesus Christ had two natures in one person, Chalcedon did not so much explain the mystery of *how* Jesus is both God and human as it sought to describe faithfully the mystery that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine without reduction upward or downward, but faithfully following out the lines of thought which hold these two imponderables together.

Yet despite the genuine progress of Chalcedonian Christology, Torrance argues that an overreaction to Adoptionism and Arianism set in, in which a focus on Jesus’ genuine humanity began to yield place to an emphasis on Christ’s perfect deity.⁷ Even amongst the Cappadocians, Torrance detects this tendency. For instance, he sees it when John Chrysostom taught that the priest on earth became the counterpart to the priesthood of Christ in heaven, “which had the effect of

3 Ibid., 142.

4 Ibid., 147.

5 Ibid., 148.

6 Ibid., 154.

7 Ibid., 185.

investing the earthly priesthood with terrible and terrifying awe.”⁸ Left out by this formulation is a clear-eyed awareness of the saving activity of *the human Jesus* towards the Father. The stage was set for a “liturgical Apollinarianism” in the East.⁹ It became endemic to see Christ in his priesthood only as God, not as human, and into this human vacuum seeped the exaltation of a human priest.¹⁰ Torrance draws this lesson: whenever we obscure the human agency of Christ our priest, a substitute priesthood arises to mediate between us and Christ.¹¹

A similar reactivity to Arianism arose in the West, which led to a diminishing of the mediatorial and priestly presence of Christ *as human*. Prayer *through the merits of Christ* replaced prayer through the mind and mediation of Christ, and as in the East, the agency of the human priest in conducting the liturgy came to the forefront. In the absence of Christ’s human bridge laid down for us, there arose the demand for other mediatorial “functionaries,” such as the cult of Mary and the saints all gathered momentum. Torrance concludes that in both East and West, “the church was thrown back upon itself to provide a priesthood which could stand in for Christ and even mediate between the sinner and Christ.”¹² In both the Byzantine and Coptic East and also in the West, “a great barrier of mystery and awe and dread comes in between the supplicant and Christ, for he is actively present in the Eucharistic sacrifice in all the terrible majesty and omnipotence of sheer deity.”¹³ Torrance’s plea is for the church to recover an emphasis on the incarnation not simply as the coming of God *into* humanity but as God *becoming a human*. Thus God comes *as a human priest* and does for us in our humanity “what we are unable to do for ourselves.”¹⁴

THE RELEVANCE OF HISTORICAL THEOLOGY FOR CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP

How does Torrance’s analysis of historical theology contribute to the renewal of our worship today? First, if Jesus in his humanity does not worship the Father *with us* and *on our behalf* in a vicarious way, then Jesus’ priestly ministry is absorbed entirely into the majesty of Godhead. As a result, the guidance of Chalcedon becomes a monument on the official mantelpiece of our doctrine but not a working map to inform actively our prayers and worship.¹⁵ The consequences are clear: unless Christ’s human mediation on our behalf is clearly acknowledged and honored in our liturgies, prayers, and sermons, we are “thrown back upon ourselves” to offer our own worship to the Father.¹⁶ Whether in corporate or individualistic forms, the effect on worship is the same—to eclipse Christ’s humanity

8 Ibid., 192.

9 Ibid., 193.

10 Ibid., 196.

11 Ibid., 206.

12 Ibid., 204.

13 Ibid., 200.

14 Ibid., 201.

15 Ibid., 204.

16 Ibid., 205.

with our own. For example, a Eucharistic celebration may be ornately decorated with “smells and bells” or rival the formality of a White House lawn ceremony. Or the priest, pastor, or worship leader may invest the presiding role with drama and grand stage presence. Either approach can lead the community to focus on the rite itself, which implicitly becomes a substitute for the agency of Christ. Our attention can be so absorbed by the mode and manner of the human priestly agency that there is an eclipse of the Son, a failure to see in the liturgy a “correlate to the crucified and risen Jesus and our participation in heavenly worship of praise and thanksgiving.”¹⁷

Whenever this *transcendent reference to Christ in our flesh* becomes either broken off or obscured, whenever our worship performance (as it were) *enshrines the mystery in itself*, then the liturgy, Eucharist, or clerical performance ironically becomes a rival to Christ. To turn this around, Torrance asks some blunt questions first raised by the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian, John McLeod Campbell: Does the sacramental celebration of the Lord’s Supper speak to us of Christ or commend itself? In our partaking of Communion, do we flee from our own worship and faith to rest in the self-offering of Christ?¹⁸

There are many ways a kind of *functional Apollinarianism* continues to distorts our worship. Sometimes, we so emphasize the importance of Jesus’ death on the cross as the crucial transaction and substitute for our sins that we can reduce everything else about the life of Jesus to a cipher, as if the crucial meaning of God’s coming as a human is its convenience in getting divinity to the cross. But surely Jesus’ death redeems because it is the gathering together and culmination of his entire life and ministry. Jesus *lives out* the Sermon on the Mount, blessing those who cursed him, thirsting with all who yearn for righteousness, forgiving those who crucified him, and loving his enemies *to the bitter end*. Jesus in his humanity triumphed over all that imperiled the intention of God to bring the kingdom to its fulfillment on earth as it is in heaven.

Sometimes we can so emphasize Christ as a *divine* mediator, and not also a mediator and high priest in our own humanity, that we lose a sense of *fellow feeling* described in Hebrews:

[2:14] Since God’s children are flesh and blood, Jesus himself became like them and shared their human nature. . . . [2:17–18] He had to become like his brothers in every way, in order to be their faithful and merciful high priest in his service to God, so that the people’s sins would be forgiven. And now he can help those who are tempted because he himself was tempted and suffered. . . . [4:15–16] Our high priest is not one who cannot feel sympathy for our weaknesses. On the contrary, we have a high priest who was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin. Let us have confidence, then, and approach God’s throne, where there is grace. There we will receive mercy and find grace to help us just when

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

we need it. [5:8] Even though he was God's son, he learned through his sufferings to be obedient. [7:17] And Jesus is our priest forever.

When we pray to and worship the one Jesus called Father *through Christ the Son*, what happens when we bypass the human Christ, who prayed for his followers in the upper room discourse with such empathy, who knelt in Gethsemane praying for Peter? What happens when we frankly do not know how to pray, as Paul poses our dilemma in Romans 8? Jesus takes our groans and sighs and confusing words to the Father as one who knows from within the weight of those sighs and groans. Contrast this with Apollinarian worship in which the emphasis is not on what unites us to God—i.e., Jesus, who in our human nature prays for us, who himself has been tempted as we are, who mediates within our humanity the mercy and companionship of God for us. Instead, the *emphasis* is on what separates us, namely Christ in his infinite majesty.

APOLLINARIAN/DOCETIC SONGS OF WORSHIP

In a careful ethnographic-theological study of charismatic worship in the contemporary Anglican church, James Stevens has used Torrance's essay to illuminate a certain rhetorical style which sets aside the humanity of God in Jesus and one-sidedly stresses Christ's deity.¹⁹ Many worship songs declare, "Jesus I exalt you" and "You are the exalted one." These acclamations can easily ignore the manner of Jesus' coming among us, which hardly can be described as exalted. The Jesus revealed in the Bible came as one who served, who emptied himself and took the form of a servant for our sake. Using the language of exaltation in worship apart from describing and semantically linking the manner and mode of Jesus' path from manger to cross can push worship into identification with an exalted, suffering free Divinity. This Divinity has utterly left behind the trajectory of the actual journey Jesus took and hence misconstrues the journey in his steps in which we are called to follow and participate.

A useful question to help us recover a balancing awareness of the humanity of Jesus and his mediation for us and in our human flesh is to ask the following: how many songs do we sing that describe the exalted One as the same One who, in his humanity, endured temptation, washed our feet, and suffered unto death? A functional Apollinarianism eviscerates our worship when songs and hymns regularly obscure or neglect Jesus' real humanity.²⁰ When Jesus' humanity is ignored, songs easily rush into the vacuum, as *the spirituality of the believer*, or the gifted worship leader becomes the focus. The recovery of the *humanity of Christ* in our prayer life and worship will surely help us interrupt the gaze upon ourselves as we worship.

Jeremy Begbie also has drawn on Torrance to interpret the implications for the content of our worship songs. He notes a certain tendency of contemporary

19 James H. S. Steven, *Worship in the Spirit: Charismatic Worship in the Church of England* (London: Paternoster Press, 2002), 199.

20 See Jeremy Begbie, "The Spirituality of Renewal Music," *Anvil* 8, no. 3 (1991): 234–36.

worship songs to neglect essential themes of Christian life, which a recovery of the humanity of Jesus' priesthood would help correct. Themes such as the cost of discipleship, suffering in face of opposition, endurance in times of trial, patience, and grief over human sinfulness are all embraced *on our behalf in God's coming to us as the man Jesus*.²¹ When our hymns and prayers do not integrate Jesus' actual achievement on our behalf, our worship inhabits a truncated gospel.

Perhaps the note most lacking, says Begbie, is the theme of hope amidst suffering, including the suffering of the entire creation. This was a huge theme in other periods of history, e. g., in the Black Gospel tradition, grounded on the slave experience from which, ironically, much Pentecostal and charismatic worship has derived.²² Without the clear centrality of the humanity of Jesus, gone is the connection of the Gospel with the pain and suffering of the world. As a result, too often our worship suggests an experience not of *connection* with the pain and suffering of the world but *an elimination and a disappearance* of pain and suffering. Is it any wonder why many non-Christians find contemporary Christian music *disconnected* from the grief and sorrow of real life which they face daily? But where the Docetism implicit in Apollinarianism abandons our humanity, Jesus our great high priest takes our broken humanity, gathers it, descends with it to the utter depths, and offers it up in prayer and worship to the Father.

Let us be clear: the problem with worship songs that emphasize the majesty of Christ is not in what they affirm but in what they neglect. When Jesus is absent as our great high priest in his role as our bridge—not just in his death on the cross but in his entire humanity, past, present, and future—what is the content of the *majesty* we praise? Surely the exalted Jesus has not been stripped of his humanity, the nail-pierced hands vanished away into divinity. For the sake of faithful witness, let our preaching, prayers, and intercession pay close attention to the words from Hebrews describing the high priest of our worship:

[7:24–25] He lives on forever and his work as priest does not pass on to someone else. . . . So he is able now and always to save those who come to God through him, because he lives forever to plead with God for them.

When the church prays, “Come Holy Spirit,” our call for the Spirit is not in isolation from Christ, nor is the Christ we exalt isolated from Jesus our brother, our great high priest who prepares a way for us, who comes alongside us, and who accompanies our prayers. On our behalf he presents them by sheer grace to the one he called Father and taught us to call *our* Father.

But when the center of gravity in our worship lays aside the narrative of this Jesus who joined our humanity to his own, modern worship becomes functionally Unitarian, as James Torrance has noted.²³ As a result, believers themselves, either corporately in our joint efforts or mediated through our worship leaders

21 Ibid., 235.

22 Ibid., 237.

23 J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 22.

and priests, invoke the Spirit to empower our worship and our prayers *directly* and immediately, as if the mediation of Jesus on our behalf has become irrelevant or simply a lingering liturgical phrase. Through a concentration on human personalities, ecclesiastical pedigree, or formulaic instructions, worship can become stiflingly self-aware of human traditions, customs, and personal charisma, while the humanity of Jesus is overshadowed by the humanity (and human organization) of the worshipping community.

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Today in our churches, many young people are much more familiar with “lift Jesus high” choruses than Isaac Watts’s “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” Therefore, it is all the more urgent for young adults to be aware of Torrance’s historical analysis and to grasp the implications of a functional Apollinarianism for contemporary worship. In the current climate of praise and worship music, this can be difficult. For instance, one assignment I gave my historical theology students was to identify texts of worship music which clearly move in an Apollinarian direction. Then, I asked them to rewrite or amend the text in a way that acknowledges the full humanity of Jesus as high priest who leads us before God. In studying their responses, I have noted numerous misconceptions as students try to grasp the significance of this issue for our worship:

1. *It’s not about the language of personal relationship.* The problem with our worship music is not that the focus is more on our own personal relationship with God than with God alone. Christians worship the One who has chosen to be for us and to come alongside us, who has determined not to be God in isolation but to draw near and redeem those made in the divine image. A functional Apollinarianism stresses our relationship to a divine, majestic Jesus without indication of the unique mode and manner of majesty of the One who emptied himself, took the form of a servant, and humbled himself to death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). This one and no other is who God has highly exalted (Phil. 2:9). This is the nature of the One who invites us to personal communion and a shared journey in his steps of servanthood and suffering love. Moreover, our relationship is with one who has come to us *as a human, as our priest*, who takes our frail prayers and offers them to the one he names as “our Father.”

If the language of personal relationship misleads, it is when we glibly translate this language for an individualistic culture that would prefer to strike out the little but immensely important *our*, and change it to the language of private ownership as *my* Father. This manner of personalizing actually isolates us within an inner religious experience rather than opens us towards a way of prayer to God which binds us to our neighbor, even as it unites us to the One Jesus who taught us to call *our Father*. If such individualistic language has a link to Apollinarian distortions, it is because we have distanced ourselves from the generous humanity of Jesus, and have distanced ourselves from our own humanity and the humanity of one another.

The “I, me, mine” trend of devotional language in worship is not wrong for affirming that God’s grace is personal and meant to change our lives. The error

is when it distorts Biblical faith by using a semantic shift in which the inclusion of our neighbor is set aside. This becomes a glaring symptom of a “Babylonian captivity” in which the church is compromised by the legacy of the Cartesian Enlightenment to define the meaning of persons in non-relational and highly individualistic categories. One of our urgent tasks in worship, as in the public life of nations, is to be continually transformed by the reality that the only humanity we have been given is a shared, relational humanity. Our selfhood is never a private possession. To the extent that Apollinarianism has trained us to neglect the humanity of Jesus, it will also train us in exclusionary and isolating ways of worship that separate us from our neighbors.

The themes of fellowship and communion remind us that Apollinarian worship forgets that God is a *triune communion of love*. If Jesus as our human priest is set aside, who accompanies and gathers our prayers and songs and takes them in the Spirit to the Father? We do. We mediate for ourselves and hence the focus is individualistically (or collectively) driven to what *we do* in worship, with our minds, our hands, and our hearts rather than the work of Christ, who accompanies all we do as our priest. But in the true spirit of accompaniment, Reformed worship can and ought to reconnect with the suffering of our neighbors near and distant, which can only happen as the content of our worship is deeply connected with the humanity of Christ. Because Apollinarianism neglects Christ’s genuine humanity, it neglects his *suffering* humanity and focuses worship on Jesus the *exalted* One, not the One who suffers for us and who calls us to have courage and whose call comes not from a majestic distance. The problem is worshipping a kind of majesty that has fundamentally lost the meekness and humility of the incarnation. It is urgent to recover the *baptized majesty of the crucified one* especially in a culture that is more comfortable polarizing God or humanity, judgment or grace, than in seeing how these are reconciled in Jesus.

2. *It is about reframing the language of exaltation.* A functional Apollinarianism is also commonly evident in the worship language surrounding Christ’s resurrection and ascension. My evidence here is the use of the word “exaltation,” particularly in some evangelical circles. In his book, *Christianity in the Academy*, the Baptist scholar, Harry Lee Poe, asserts that the cornerstone of genuine evangelical worship and experience is the awareness of an *exalted* Christ, even linking Bonhoeffer with this awareness. Poe writes:

For those who died for their faith in Christ, the present experience of the exalted Christ was more real than the sufferings of this world. According to their accounts, the martyrs had an awareness of Christ’s presence even as they were dying. Heaven had already opened, and they inhabited two places: physically they were still on earth, but spiritually they were already entering the heavenly realm. So Stephen says, “Look, I see heaven open and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:56) Present experience of the reality of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ marks

the witness of the martyrs as they faced death. This kind of terminology is also in the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.²⁴

But when we turn to what Bonhoeffer actually says as he faced death in a Gestapo prison, we see a profoundly Christological rethinking implicit in his martyr's faith. In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, he writes:

God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8:17 ("He took up our diseases and carried our infirmities.") makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering. Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help.²⁵

Bonhoeffer describes here "a reversal of what the religious man expects from God. Man is summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world."²⁶ Poe, by contrast, depicts an exaltation that fits comfortably within a doctetic expectation of deliverance as escape from suffering, rather than the gospel's surprising narrative that God *as a suffering human* has born the suffering and pain of the world. In other words, to gaze directly towards heaven as our guarantor for future exaltation looks past that person and place where heaven has earthed itself in the unlikeliest of circumstances, the man of sorrows who "took up our diseases and carried our infirmities."²⁷

A more reliable guide for strength and consolation in participating in Christ's way (2 Cor. 4:10–12)—which all Christians are called in their small way to share and which authentically anticipates Bonhoeffer—is the hymn of Paul Gerhardt: "When my heart is most fearful, help me out of my fears, *through thy fear and pain*."²⁷ Moltmann's comments on Gerhardt's hymn bear repeating in order to clarify what exactly gave the sufferer hope:

Suffering is overcome by suffering, and wounds are healed by wounds. For the suffering in suffering is the lack of love, and the wounds in wounds are the abandonment, and the powerlessness in pain is the unbelief. And therefore the suffering of abandonment is overcome by the suffering of love, which is not afraid of what is sick and ugly, but accepts it and takes it to itself in order to heal it.²⁸

24 Harry Lee Poe, *Christianity in the Academy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 109.

25 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 361.

26 Ibid.

27 Quoted in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 46; italics mine.

28 Ibid.

Consider the guidance offered by the deep piety of many Negro spirituals sung by Black slaves. Theirs was an experience of abject humiliation and literal abandonment to chains and shackles, but they learned to steady their hearts as they learned to connect their suffering to that of Christ. The haunting question repeated in each refrain, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” witnesses that somehow the agony of American slavery, in order to be endured and redeemed, had to be yoked to the agony suffered by God in Christ.²⁹ For slavery’s victims, the intimacy of their most profound worship experience on earth and lifting up their heads to anticipate a better day somehow was resolved in the close proximity their music brought them to Christ, crucified, nailed to the tree, pierced in the side, and laid in the tomb. The only greatness of God that we can declare with confidence has come to us clothed in nail-pierced human flesh. Because of this unique cruciform signpost, our ideas and images about divine exaltation must be remixed as crucified glory. Because the highest no longer stands without the lowest, prisoner Bonhoeffer endured and died as one whose lowliness and suffering was experienced not as abandonment but as accompanied.

To summarize: the best remedy to combat the distortions of Apollinarianism is for worship consistently to circle the center of its attention upon the journey from manger to cross where Jesus’ humanity is fully unveiled, which thereby disqualifies all forms of docetic reduction. In other words, intrinsic to the worship of God’s majesty and exalted status is the humble birth and anguished death of a first-century Jew living under Roman occupation.

THE DILEMMA OF SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS IN WORSHIP

This brings us to the following question: how can our worship best bear witness to the saving humanity of Jesus? In other words, how can worship faithfully reflect this revolution in our human conceptualizations of divine majesty without absorbing it into some kind of conceptual mastery, sentimental contrivance, or bureaucratic control? How does faithful worship re-present and bear faithful witness to Christ, from manger, cross, and tomb to resurrection and upper room in a way that preserves the sheer humanity of Jesus without paying glib theological compliments that inadvertently minimize the scandal? In what follows I will note several of Torrance’s remarks on the way towards a more faithful worship and offer suggestions on ways to proceed further on the path he has opened for the church. Of course, my reflections here are offered not as pronouncements but as attempts to push the conversation along, subject to correction and refinement by others that share a similar desire for Reformed worship to be marked by a Christ-centered, Trinitarian pattern.

As a seminarian in the 1970s, I was concerned to read C. S. Lewis’ essay, “Priestesses in the Church?” and to wonder if the Reformed tradition was in danger of a serious disloyalty to the gospel by granting women permission to be ordained as pastors. As Lewis put it, the priest (or pastor) was representing Christ; to have a woman priest would be like referring to God as mother, or the

second person of the Trinity as Daughter, and would reverse the mystical marriage of the church and God, with Christ as the bride.³⁰ Indeed, the notion of a sin against the grammar of our being male and female seems to be a standard argument in Anglo-Catholic and Roman Catholic circles—that in celebrating Holy Communion, the one who presides must be male because Jesus was male. (I note in passing that though Jesus was also ethnically Jewish, Gentile males have long since been grafted in. Apparently gender trumps ethnicity or race as the *conditio sine qua non* of human identity.) After reading Torrance’s *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, I was confronted with an approach that reframed the issue away from gender specificity and exclusion. For Torrance, at the Lord’s Supper, the one true priest is Jesus himself. And, if indeed he is the *head*, then we the church are a *corporate priesthood*, which the New Testament calls the *body* of Christ. *Corporately*, we are priests to each other, forming a servant community under Jesus, our head. This opens the way for our relations to one another in the manner spoken to James and John (and their mother) as they came seeking special seats of privilege (Matt. 20:20–28). This manner of humble servanthood becomes the ongoing sign of the church’s authenticity and the controlling description of our mission to the world.³¹ Henceforth Jesus’ ongoing priesthood in our midst ought not be usurped by grasping for dominance, whether male or female. Further, contra Lewis, how confusing to our imagination to envision Jesus’ words, “this is my body, this is my blood,” as pointing to each and every celebrant! Rather, Jesus intends with these words to refer to the loaf and the cup that he takes in his hands. These tactile signs, not myriads of future clergy, represent and remind the church of Jesus’ real presence.

Today I think the church, which seeks to be always reforming (*semper reformanda*), should go further along this trajectory. Too often the church’s corporate priesthood is narrowed to an individualistic act in which the preacher, worship leader, or priest serves a solo function and the corporate priesthood reduced to an audience. This is the consequence of the church forgetting that Jesus Christ is the true leader of our worship, not the devout person with a robe, a clerical collar, or a lead guitarist wearing a microphone headset and a Hawaiian shirt. How might our worship Sunday-by-Sunday be transformed through a corporate, holy nation of priests performing the liturgy rather than being an audience that watches an individual performance? Certainly, for anyone who has visited the Taizé community in Burgundy, France, the existence of different tasks in the liturgy need not replace a profoundly corporate performing of the worship together.

The more we recover a shared priesthood and are equipped to be priests to one another, as James urges in the context of community ministry (James 5:13–16), we will also remedy the oft-noted malaise of a clerical workaholic, isolated by a sense of role, notorious for neglecting the fourth commandment and its prescription of a weekly day of rest from one’s labor. Will the church really suffer

30 C. S. Lewis, “Priestesses in the Church?” in *God in the Dock* (1948; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 236–37.

31 See *Conflict and Agreement*, vol. 1, *Order and Disorder*, 161; vol. 2, *The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel*, 137, 145.

an absence of nurture if a clergy takes a summer vacation like doctors, lawyers, plumbers, and construction workers do? I have been told there are churches where the problem is the opposite, but this is only the inverse of the same symptomatic focus (in the form of frustration) on the individual priest rather than a sharing together in a corporate priesthood.

IMAGELESS RELATIONS AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Finally, Torrance has stressed that our knowledge of God is not based on logical inference from sense experience, as in a Thomist epistemology, but is rather a direct, intuitive knowing in which we indwell God's Word.³² God acts directly upon us as we indwell invisible, imageless relations, which inhere in the Word.³³ Through this imageless way, as taught by the Hebrews, God becomes disclosed to us apart from visual or pictorial mediation and so refers to God without reading back creaturely (idolatrous) content into God.³⁴

What does this suggest for worship? Torrance's mentor, Karl Barth, famously asserted that pictorial and symbolic representations are out of place in the Protestant Church.³⁵ Let the church represent Christ solely by the gathered community in the action of worship and service! Shall Reformed worship today revert to the classic Swiss model as it still towers before us in the grand Reformed edifices of Zurich, Basle, and Geneva? Indeed, ought we replace all remaining stained glass windows, stow away all remaining altarpiece paintings, and either banish or apply the hammer to any lingering statues or sculpture? Moreover, is the way of knowing God in worship only to be heard through the words spoken by the preacher as they point imagelessly to Christ without interposing potentially idolatrous outer forms, such as bread or wine? Using this logic, the Quaker tradition has eliminated external forms, and celebrates the Christ who is present apart from all mediating symbols. Indeed, are not all such forms easily deformed by a clerical caste into idols, whereby access becomes a means of hierarchical control?

Certainly the Quaker tradition has given the church a prophetic witness against the misuse of means, for we need Christ, not something that resembles Christ!³⁶ Yet Torrance would remind us that in theology and in worship, "there is no disembodied word."³⁷ If, as Athanasius put it, Jesus is both the only *logos* and *eidos* of God, a vital theology of the Word ought not to confuse imageless relations with a disembodied word, as if we could bracket off the reality that God's

32 T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 84, 273.

33 T. F. Torrance, "The Integration of Form in Natural and in Theological Science," in *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge* (Belfast: Christian Journals Limited, 1984), 90–92, 96.

34 T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 89.

35 Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth* (London: SCM Press Limited, 1975), 395.

36 C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 51.

37 T. F. Torrance, *Kingdom and Church: A Study in the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1956), 47.

word has been made flesh (John 1:14).³⁸ The irony of the stress on imageless relations is the temptation to substitute an invisible conceptuality or abstraction for that which is utterly concrete—the Word made flesh. The worrisome feature would be to promote an overly intellectualistic focus on ideas rather than a whole-person knowing which entails hearing, yes, but also seeing and tasting. Only a whole-person knowing is an appropriate response to the fully human coming of God in Christ. In this sense, we can agree with the Thomists, in that we are dependent on sense experience, that is, on the empirical reality of Jesus the Word made flesh for our knowledge of God. Yet we can also affirm that through Jesus a cognitive Word is given to us immediately, not inferentially, as through God’s Spirit we indwell this reality.

Part of the jostling here between image and idea may be due to Torrance’s framework of thinking within a hierarchical scheme of knowledge borrowed from Albert Einstein’s writings on science. That is, in the highest level of knowledge, scientific statements connect us *ontologically* to God.³⁹ This is why Torrance endorses “theological science” as his primary metaphor for theology, over doxology (aesthetics) and service (praxis). To the extent this perspective frames worship as a level removed from the primary activity of theology, it can engender a liturgical observation which, though lacking nothing in respect to correct doctrinal statement, is detached from a felt attunement to the truth, and thus profits little. Moreover, a lack of sensitivity towards a proper *emotional rationality*, as John Macmurray puts it, can even inadvertently foster apathy.⁴⁰ So I would suggest we bind together the value of auditive, imageless concepts with an equal emphasis on indwelling Biblical *images* in order to nurture and ground our emotional lives in the truth. Thus, our worship can be “a touching place,” as the Iona Community song puts it, indwelling the reality where the incarnation of God in Christ overcomes the disruption between language and being, word and event, doxology and theology, heaven and earth. In other words, the renewal of our worship will not happen by preference, suppression, or repression of either our imagination or our thought life but only by a deeper and more congruent turning of both towards the truth as it is in Jesus. Artful depiction and accurate scientific precision both have their essential task in worship. An artful worship seeks to re-present and re-arouse our fading emotional receptivity to the God-given Biblical images. A worship imbued with the spirit of scientific precision and conceptual clarity enables us to know and to love the truth with all our minds. Torrance has described well how faithful worship brings together our cognitive and affective faculties before the truth.

38 T. F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 166.

39 T. F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Belfast: Christian Journals Limited, 1980), 156ff.

40 John Macmurray, *Reason and Emotion* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1935), 190–92.

For through the Word Christ comes to us personally and worship reaches its *focal point and culmination in personal encounter with the living Christ*. It is then that Holy Communion has its rightful place crowning faith with vision and enacting in our flesh and blood the real presence of Christ.⁴¹

Distortions arise when we look *at* the elements of bread and wine instead of *looking through* these to Christ.⁴² But Word and Sacrament together as the work of the people (*leiturgia*) become the place in our worship, where through a *mediated immediacy*, we are drawn into communion with Christ, the one truly human leader of our worship.⁴³

Finally, it must be said that all talk of carefully balanced words and images, or even the recovery of a proper notion of the humanity of Christ, will not advance the renewal of our worship beyond sentimental aesthetics or sterile interpretation unless we both hear and feel in our bones the message of the Old Testament prophets—that God can get awfully tired of our liturgies, words, and ceremonies when we fail to “let justice flow on like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream” (Amos 5:24). The prophets tell us our regard for the poor among us will be either the proof of our worship or the countersign that our worship has become an idolatrous surfeit of words and images. If we connect these words to Jesus’ parable of the final judgment (Matt. 25), where knowing him is identified with care for the sick, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, and feeding the hungry, then we have an agenda for any local congregation that desires to function, in Lesslie Newbigin’s words, as a “hermeneutic of the gospel.”⁴⁴ That is, *to the extent* that we show forth “hands and sides” of suffering love as part and parcel of our preaching and worship, the world will be able to grasp the meaning of our evangelical words. “The body of the risen Lord is recognizable by the scars of the Passion, and his disciples will be corporately recognizable as his body when they bear the same scars.”⁴⁵

41 *Conflict and Agreement*, vol. 1, *Order and Disorder*, 55; italics mine. See also the sermons of Robert Bruce that Torrance edited. Bruce describes the sacrament as conveying meaning to the mind by the eye whereas preaching conveys meaning to the mind by the ear. Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper: Sermons preached in the Kirk of Edinburgh A.D. 1589*, edited with an introduction by T. F. Torrance (London: James Clarke, 1958), 54.

42 *Theology in Reconciliation*, 122.

43 I am indebted to Colin Gunton for this phrase. Cf. *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (London: T & T Clark, 1995), 35, 58. Gunton registers caution that Torrance’s emphasis on intuitive knowledge, which I would associate with his prioritization of imageless relations, may not fully allow for the necessity of *mediation* (word become flesh) which is at the heart of the Christian doctrine of revelation.

44 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

45 Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season, Perspectives on Christian World Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 121, 146, 156, 175, and 188.

It is fitting to grant Torrance himself the final word on the mutual indwelling of these themes for the renewal of Reformed worship in our day—the recovery of Christ’s humanity for our worship, the renewal of our corporate priesthood, and the mediating enactment of the signs of Christ’s redemptive presence through preaching, sacraments, and missional service in Jesus’ name and according to his own servant style.

The perfection of the Church’s union with Christ Jesus has to be carried through the conditions of time, and how it is straitened until that is accomplished! By means of the Eucharist, so to speak, the agony of Calvary is witnessed in the ages into which the Church goes out as the suffering servant in the mission of the world’s redemption. And so it learns to fill up that which is eschatologically in arrears of the sufferings of Christ as it throws itself into the heart of the world’s trouble and acts out there, however costly that may be, the reconciliation of the Cross.⁴⁶

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46 *Conflict and Agreement*, vol. 2, *The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel*, 172.